

Basic Christianity: You Must Be Born Again (of Water and Spirit)

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 1999. Scripture Lesson: John 3:1-17.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

What if you'd never been born? How would the world be different? Now put a new twist on that question. Jesus talked about being born again. What if you'd never been born again? How would the world be different? Let's talk about it.

In the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life" we're confronted imaginatively with the thought, "What if I'd never been born? How would my community be different?" Most of us are familiar with the story but let me refresh your memory. George Bailey is considering suicide. He wishes he'd never been born. But right at the most critical moment an apprentice angel, Clarence, shows George how his birth has changed the world for the better. **As a boy George Bailey saved his younger brother from drowning.** His brother grew up, served in the Army during WW2, and saved the lives of hundreds of soldiers on a transport ship through heroic action. If George had never been born, his brother would have drowned and all those soldiers would have lost their lives. **When George was 12 he worked in a drug store for Mr. Gower the pharmacist.** Mr. Gower mistakenly filled a prescription with poison. George discovered the mistake and prevented a disaster. If George had never been born, an innocent person would have been poisoned and Mr. Gower would have gone to jail for manslaughter. **When George became an adult he took over his father's building and loan business.** He enabled hundreds of working poor people to own homes. If George had never been born those poor people would be living in slums. George Bailey made a difference in his community. The world was a better place because George Bailey had been born.

Now how has God's gift of new birth made our town better? How would Oxford be different if God had never blessed us with a spiritual birth from above? Jesus said to Nicodemus, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. You must be born from above." Another time Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The idea of rebirth was widespread in the ancient world. Old Testament prophets promised the rebirth of the nation of Israel. In the New

Testament Paul wrote, "God saved us through *the water of rebirth* and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Another early Christian wrote, "God has given us *a new birth* into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from dead. *You have been born anew* through the living and enduring word of God." The new birth is *directly related to although not equated with baptism*. Paul wrote, "We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead so we too might walk in *newness of life*."

If we've entered the church through baptism and faith in Christ we've been reborn. **We shouldn't be ashamed to call ourselves *born again Christians***. We main line Christians shouldn't allow fundamentalists to co-opt a perfectly good term. If we're Christians, if we've been baptized and trust in Jesus Christ we've been born again. If someone asks you if you're a born again Christian, tell them. But what difference has it made? How would the world be different if we'd never been born again? Put it another way. Has our church membership made any difference?

One of the great tragedies of the church - main line churches especially. People get baptized, profess their faith in Christ but never become mature Christians. It's like they're born again but never grow. It's a real tragedy when a baby doesn't grow, doesn't mature, doesn't learn to walk and talk. It's a greater tragedy that so many born-again Christians don't grow spiritually. We never learn to speak the faith.

Being a member of a small group of Christians can help you grow spiritually. I'm encouraging all of us to become involved during lent in a small group. Form a small group to strengthen your marriage, to learn to pray, to discover your spiritual gifts, to become a better steward of your money, to change your lifestyle in ways that benefit poor people. Small groups are a proven way Christians grow in maturity.

A couple weeks ago I got a letter from Melissa Claypoole, a freshman at the University of Pittsburgh. She wrote, "**Since coming to college, I've really grown in my faith. I joined a women's Bible study and go to Time Out Christian Fellowship. It's just so exciting to worship and hang out with other people my age, and do nothing but praise God.**" The new birth that

Through her involvement in small groups

Jesus spoke of is making a difference in Melissa's life. Let the new birth make a difference in your life. Join a bible study. Take time out from your busy schedule to become a part of a small group Christian fellowship.

In Africa they say that "it takes a village to raise a child." But it takes a congregation to raise a new-born child of God. Spiritual growth is not automatic. Spiritual growth doesn't just happen even if you attend services regularly. Churches are filled with people who attend services for their entire lives but are still spiritual babies. **Spiritual growth is intentional.** It requires exercise and a healthy diet and a supportive environment.

If you've been baptized, trusted in Christ, joined this church - how has it made a difference? Has it made you more honest? Has it committed you to the well-being of Oxford? **In the summer of 1805, a number of native-American chiefs met at Buffalo Creek in New York. They heard a sermon by a Mr. Cram from the Boston Missionary Society. When he had concluded his sermon, he gave the invitation to be born again. One of the chiefs, Red Jacket, stood up and said to Mr. Cram: "Brother, we are told that you've been preaching to white people in this place. These people have become our neighbors. We're acquainted with them. We'll wait a little while to see what effect being born again has on them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we'll then consider again what you've said to us today about being born again."**

The world is saying to us born-again Christians that **"we hear you say you're born again Christians but we're going to watch how you live out what you profess."** The world is watching. Let's show the world. God has given us a wonderful ^{new} life. **By the mercy of God we have been born again by the power of the resurrection. Make a difference! Do not be conformed to the world! Be transformed by the renewal of your minds and hearts and wills! As new born babes desire the milk of the Word of God! I close with the collect for Christmas day found in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer:**

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.